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ABSTRACT

Identified in this research report are variables acting as supports and constraints to the development of a school community relations program. Background information concerning the characteristics of the school studied and its administration is provided. Major influences on the development of a school community relations program in this particular school are described and discussed. These include the principal's role, school district size, teacher attitudes and behaviors, teacher integration, teacher transiency, the instructional program, State and Federal guidelines, the allocation of resources, parent attitudes, socioeconomic influences, desegregation efforts, and parent participation. The influence of these factors on the goals of the school community relations program are also described and discussed. Implications of this study are summarized and evaluated. (EB)

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PERSPECTIVES ON SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

SUPPORTS AND CONTRAINTS TO SCHOOL-COMMUNITY
RELATIONS IN AN URBAN, INNER-CITY SCHOOL

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SUPPORTS AND CONSTRAINTS TO SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN AN URBAN, INNER-CITY SCHOOL

The research reported in this paper was part of a larger study of school-community relations conducted by the Home-School-Community Relations Project at the Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Individualized Schooling . At the time of this study, the Wisconsin R&D Center was focusing its major efforts on the improvement of an instructional management system for elementary schools known as Individually Guided Education (IGE). One of the unique characteristics of this system is the inclusion of planned school-community relations at the local school site as a necessary component of the total instructional delivery system.

The principles of effective school-community relations may be applied to an entire urban school system or any administrative part of it. However, the findings and implications generated by this research study rest on the theory that local schools in the urban setting function as distinct political units affected by the communities they serve as well as by the system's organizational norms (Summerfield, 1971). Thus, while school-community relations may ideally be viewed as a programmatic effort encompassing specified processes and designed to produce designated outcomes, each school must adapt and adopt procedures which best utilize supporting factors and minimize constraining factors in the local school environment. It is the implementation of these procedures at the local school level which ultimately support or constrain the school-community relations efforts of the entire system.

Previous case study and survey research by the Home-School-Community Relations Project indicated that IGE schools carried out a variety of activities to improve communication with parents and to involve them in children's schooling (Krupa, 1976; Lake, 1975). Some activities, such as report card conferences, were actually conducted as part of the instructional program. Other interaction opportunities such as having parents volunteer in classrooms were often ad hoc activities motivated more by immediate teacher needs than by identified school-community relations goals.

The above studies and others conducted in IGE schools (Klenke, 1975; Miles, 1975) provided an overall view of the strengths and weaknesses of the school-community relations component. Although Karges (1977) indicated that lack of time was a factor in limiting planned school-community relations activities, no deliberate efforts preceded this study to identify those factors which caused schools to treat this component less systematically than the instructional components of IGE. Further, as IGE implementation efforts started to be accelerated in urban centers, a need for more information about supporting and constraining school-community relations factors in urban school systems and inner-city neighborhoods became apparent.

To facilitate the description of school and community conditions in an inner-city school, this researcher spent three months as a participant-observer at a school in one of the twenty largest districts in the nation. Formal and informal interviews, observation, and collection of relevant documents were among the field methodologies used to compile data about the school and community (Bartels, 1978).

The School and Community Setting

Cassody School* was one of nine elementary schools in the two and one-half square mile community of Traceway, a segregated Black settlement in the larger city of Silver Lake. Unlike today's transitional neighborhoods which are marked by white flight, Traceway has always been "home" to a predominantly Black population. The earliest of the immigrants came to the area with the railroads and shared the territory with a minority of Mexican Americans. In the early 1940s, World War II prompted a mass migration of Blacks from the South to work in factories. They displaced the few Mexican Americans who remained in Traceway and taxed city services and housing opportunities to the limits. A 1947 City Planning Commission Report referred to the Traceway area as "blighted" because of the low assessed value of the property, the low rental pattern, and the high disease and delinquency rates.

Conditions in the Traceway neighborhoods did not improve in the 1950's despite promises that several federally funded low-income housing projects would be built to relieve overcrowding and poor living situations. The actual population density of the projects far exceeded the original projections and served to exacerbate whatever slum conditions already existed in the community.

* Names of persons and places have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the research setting.

By the mid 1950s Cassody School was serving over 2000 students, most of whom lived in the Parkwood Village Housing Project. The school did not get relief from its overcrowded conditions until another elementary school was built at the opposite end of the project in the early 1960s. Still, the general social and economic conditions in Traceway did not improve. Finally, as in a number of other cities across the nation, violence broke out and Traceway became the originating site of a major civil disturbance.

The social and political unrest in the community had a direct affect upon conditions at Cassody School. Historically, the school was staffed primarily by Black teachers under the direction of a white principal. After the civil disturbance, militant Blacks with some support from inside the school demanded, among other things, a Black principal. Three white males were relieved of their short administrative terms at the school before the system finally yielded to community demands. It was in 1969 that Mrs. Boone, a Black female, was appointed principal of Cassody School.

Mrs. Boone's arrival at Cassody School was a major event in the social history of the school. Not only did she satisfy demands for a certain racial type, but she adamantly expressed her belief that Black children could learn to read and write. Further, she let it be known that she believed Black parents were a necessary part of the total formula for their children's success. Mrs. Boone spent long hours soliciting parent support and working to strengthen an instructional program that previously helped place the school in the lowest percentiles on all city-wide standardized tests.

The arrival of a new principal at Cassody School coincided effectively with large infusions of federal monies into the inner-city schools of the Silver Lake District. However, unlike many other ESEA Title I projects, the introduction of individualized instruction, added staff, and the deliberate involvement of parents in programs at Cassody School paid off. Children and adults alike were recognized as individuals having ability to perform well, and they basked in their many successes. Parents and teachers who were at the school previous to 1969 talked about how the school was "turned around," and how parents who were apathetic or non-supportive changed as circumstance in the school changed.

The data for this study was collected approximately ten years after the urban upheavels of the sixties. As in other neighborhoods, the number of school-age children had declined and Cassody School was now serving about 700 students. Many near-by schools were beginning to serve Hispanic students as Blacks were able to find housing in other parts of the city. The Cassody School neighborhood was changing too, but not as a result of the racial origin of its residents. Employees and parents who knew the neighborhood made it clear to the researcher that most of the "old" families had moved and "these children are different. Their mothers are younger, there are fewer fathers living with their families, and they only do what they want to do" (Bartels, 1978).

Mrs. Boone was still the principal at the school during the time of this study. The amount of federal dollars for the instructional program had decreased, but the school still had many special services. Achievement

scores continued to be reported at near the national average. A new state program emphasizing individualized instruction in primary grades did not provide lucrative funding, but it was instrumental in encouraging parent involvement in classrooms. Generally speaking, Cassody School was a dynamic focal point in a relatively inert community marked by crime, transiency, and conditions of poverty.

The Research Study

It was not the purpose of this study to evaluate the school-community relations program at Cassody School by rating the activities according to a predetermined scale. Instead, activities and procedures at the school were viewed within a framework developed at the Wisconsin R&D center for identifying programmatic elements, interaction processes, and long-range goals. The research was exploratory in that it sought to identify those variables acting as supports and constraints to the development of a school-community relations program based on this model. It was found that conditions affecting such an effort originated both within the school organization and within the community.

The organizational conditions which acted as supports and/or constraints to developing a school-community relations program at Cassody School were enumerated as follows:

1. Size of district
2. Locus of district decision making
3. Attitudes and behaviors of district administrators

4. Attitudes and behaviors of the local school principal
5. Attitudes and behaviors of teachers
6. Teacher transiency
7. The instructional program
8. State and federal programs
9. Allocation of resources

The conditions in the school neighborhood which had positive and/or negative impacts on school-community relations efforts at Cassody School were identified as:

1. Poverty and related conditions
2. Limited formal schooling of parents
3. Working parents
4. Crime and vandalism
5. Socioeconomic and cultural values
6. Attitudes of involved parents

The influence of these conditions on program, process, and goal elements of the school-community relations program may very well be idiosyncratic to Cassody School. However, a discussion of these findings will make it apparent that this study has a number of implications for practitioners and policy-makers alike.

Programmatic Elements

The programmatic elements of an effective school-community relations program were outlined by the Home-School-Community Relations Project as

(a) an assessment of school and community needs; (b) specified objectives with related activities to meet identified needs; (c) identification of roles and responsibilities; and (d) an evaluation component.

Unlike other IGE schools studied by the project, Cassody School included all these elements and a few more in a program plan for what the staff called parent involvement. This approach was supported primarily by guidelines for state and federal programs which required school-site planning for instructional as well as support service components in the school program. This program planning process for local schools, as well as district and state evaluation procedures, required accountability for the development and implementation of school-community relations and instructional activities.

Another major influence on the development of a school-community relations program was the leadership of the principal at Cassody School. Mrs. Boone educated parents and teachers to programmatic planning procedures. She encouraged teachers to utilize a variety of communication and involvement activities, and she emphasized the attainment of long-range program goals.

The Silver Lake School District, in contrast to smaller districts, had the resources to provide specialized services and personnel to support a programmatic approach to school-community relations. However, the utilization of such services was dependent on the principal's awareness and willingness to engage available specialized personnel in activities supporting the local school program.

Organizational factors constraining a programmatic approach to school-community relations are attributed primarily to the instructional program, teacher attitudes, and teacher transiency. Each of these factors can be traced either directly or indirectly to another all-encompassing condition existing at the school; namely, the desegregation of the teaching staff.

The district desegregation plan in Silver Lake introduced an unanticipated variable into this study. Responding to a court order, the district personnel office reassigned large numbers of teachers to schools throughout the city on the basis of their race shortly before this study commenced. This procedure had far-reaching effects on schools with largely segregated staffs and Cassody was no exception. In fact, Cassody School was even more hard hit than some other schools because of the nature of the instructional program at the school.

The implementation of Individually Guided Education at Cassody School resulted in a highly structured environment in which children were frequently grouped and regrouped for instruction in basic skills. This organizational plan and the school's interpretation of the actual teaching-learning process required a uniform, specialized approach to instruction. The mass exodus of nearly half of the school's trained teaching staff because of the desegregation plan, and a drop in enrollment, left the school understaffed with people who understood the processes and goals of the instructional program.

To complicate the staffing problems even further, some of the new white teachers came to the school only because they did not wish to lose their jobs with the district. Other of the new teachers felt that they were misled about the nature of the instructional program at the school, or they admitted they were simply unable to cope with the conditions they were experiencing. As a result, some teachers were frequently absent and others resigned. This resulted in a continual stream of substitute teachers in the school who, besides not understanding the instructional program, were not committed nor concerned with parent involvement and school-community relations. In addition, the instability of the new staff members exacerbated concerns and complaints of many of the remaining black teachers, thus generating an added problem of staff relations.

The major impact of the desegregation plan on a programmatic approach to school-community relations was to limit the amount of time available for concerns not directly related to instruction. Teachers indicated that in order to fulfill their instructional responsibilities, they often did not have time or energy to systematically involve parents in the school program. Further, the nature of the instructional program, combined with the number of teachers new to the school, required inservice training emphasizing instructional procedures rather than school-community relations processes and goals. As a result of these factors, attitudes of teachers who did not understand the program goals tended to limit activities based on school-community relations principles.

Efforts on the part of the school to develop a programmatic approach to school-community relations were supported by a small core of parents and grandparents who responded to communications, attended school events, and participated in organized activities at the school. However, most people did not make regular time commitments for reasons commonly attributed to the environmental conditions and other factors related to poverty. Some of these are discussed below.

Many of the families in the Cassody School attendance area were headed by young mothers whose sole support for them and their several children was some form of government aid. They took their children to public health clinics, traveled by bus to shop outside of the community where there were more than sidewalk stores, and generally were preoccupied with meeting the basic survival needs of their families. They seemed to have little time or desire to be involved in school activities.

In contrast, most of the other parents who did not receive government aid worked. This often included both mothers and fathers, neither of whom was then available to come to the school during the day. In addition, because of the high rates of crime and vandalism in the community, school events were not scheduled after dark and teachers were not encouraged to visit the children's homes. These factors, along with limited formal schooling of parents and attitudes of deference toward the school did not preclude, but certainly inhibited, efforts toward developing a systematic school-community relations program at Cassody School.

Process Elements

School-community relations activities and procedures at Cassody School were also studied within the context of five interaction processes assumed to be essential for an effective program. These processes and their definitions are as follows: (a) Analysis is the process by which issues and subpublics in the school and community are identified and related; (b) Communication is the process which utilizes all forms of interaction among various subpublics and between the school and the subpublics; (c) Involvement is the process through which various subpublics contribute resources of time, energy, and expertise to a school; (d) Participation is the process which provides access to the decision and policy making processes of school; and (e) Resolution is a process which is designed to solve problems and to reduce actual or potential conflict.

The above processes were examined separately for the purpose of this study; however, they typically overlap and operate simultaneously in a school-community relations program. For instance, involvement does not occur without at least one-way communication. In turn, involvement and two-way communication are prerequisites of participation. Activities designed to use the communication, involvement, and participation processes were readily documented through both formal and informal data collection methods. The processes and impacts of analysis and resolution were more subtle and difficult to analyze.

The development of activities utilizing the processes of communication, involvement, and participation at Cassody School were, like the programmatic elements, supported by requirements and guidelines for state and federal programs. Local schools were required to keep records of face-to-face and other communication efforts, to report the number of parents who were involved as classroom aides and in volunteer capacities, to record attendance at parent education classes, and to file records of the mandatory advisory council meetings. However, the success of activities utilizing the processes of communication, involvement, and participation was most often dependent on the attitudes and behaviors of school personnel and/or the failure of parents to respond overtures by the school.

The principal at Cassody School recognized the importance of communicating with parents and other subpublics in the community, and encouraged involvement and participation in school activities. She encouraged school visitations and made herself readily available to talk with parents when they so desired. Yet, inconsistencies in her behavior served to both support and constrain the school-community relations program. Some parents looked upon her as a "savior" for the school, other resented her aggressiveness, and still others were afraid of her.

In much the same way, attitudes and behaviors of teachers served as supports and constraints to the effective use of school-community relations processes. For example, manifest efforts by some teachers to encourage parent volunteers to come to their classrooms were simultaneously accompanied by non-verbal behaviors which discouraged parents

from more than an initial contact. Also, well-intentioned telephone communications were perceived by some parents as negative because of teacher tendencies to focus on children's problems rather than on their positive behaviors. Finally, a genuine lack of awareness about the messages they were sending, and frequent lack of understanding of the culture and problems of low income parents contributed to a constraining belief among some teachers that "the school is doing all it can do."

Just as individual attitudes and behaviors toward parents supported or constrained the effective use of the interaction processes, conflicting attitudes and behaviors between school personnel sometimes limited the use of the processes. For instance, the principal endorsed an open-door policy that encouraged parents to come to the school to visit or work in classrooms without advance notice to the teachers. This was done without acknowledging that some teachers were unable to cope with both instructional responsibilities and parent communication and involvement procedures under such circumstances. So on the one hand, parents received messages that they were always welcome at the school, and on the other hand, some teachers projected negative attitudes and behaviors which indicated they were not pleased with the parents' presence.

The processes of analysis and resolution were not observed to function in the same way as communication, involvement, and participation. It seems these two processes were more a reflection of the political leadership style of the principal than of a programmatic plan. In a study of the politics of education at the local school level Summerfield (1971)

states, "The principal's chief political function is to minimize conflict between the community and the neighborhood school." This function is congruent with the political objective of school-community relations indicated by Bowles and Fruth (1976) and demonstrated by Mrs. Boone at Cassody School.

When Mrs. Boone came to Cassody School, there was unrest both in and between the community and the school. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the new principal set about identifying key subpublics in the community and applying the process of analysis to confront the issues with which they were most concerned. Thus, she made a deliberate effort to learn the names of children and then systematically call parents to solicit their support for the school by discussing their child's academic progress. She sought the help of influentials and political figures in the neighborhood, city, and the state promising improved achievement and a positive school image in return for needed resources. At the same time she provided leadership for dealing with issues of discipline, instruction within the school, and improved safety and questionable housing practices in the neighborhood. By formally and informally analyzing community issues and their related subpublics, conflict between the school and the community and within the school was minimized enough to focus on the task of meeting educational goals for the students.

The Summerfield study (1971) further indicated the style utilized by principals to reduce or resolve conflict is influenced by the nature of the school community. The Cassody School community was largely

characterized by inertness during the course of this study. After Mrs. Boone's first year at Cassody School there was little evidence of either mass support for or mass opposition to the school. The manifest conflict that could be identified during this study revolved around issues related to the instructional program and district policies. However, most of the opposition came from within the school itself and could be linked to certain teachers and parents who worked as paid aides or volunteers. As a result, the principal was able to neutralize the internal conflict by defining the spheres of decision making influence of both staff and parent groups through a variety of techniques related to agenda control.

Summerfield (1971) goes on to state that while it is the principal's responsibility to reduce conflict between the school and the community, it is not necessarily his or her function to reduce conflict between the community and central office authorities. This principle for school-community relations is illustrated by the participatory role of the advisory council at Cassody School. While a number of people on the advisory council were consistently critical of how Mrs. Boone dealt with issues within the school, the council was a vocal lobbying group on behalf of the school within the district and the administrative region. For example, when the district abolished corporal punishment for students, the Cassody School advisory council disputed the ruling before the Board of Education. When key instructional leaders were to be transferred out of Cassody School in the name of desegregation, the advisory council protested to the regional superintendent. The advisory council was not always successful in its petitioning, but the group in

general, and the chairperson of the council in particular, was well-known to regional and district officials.

The role of the advisory council at Cassody School was an interesting phenomena in the study of the processes of participation and resolution. When members tried to change instructional procedures valued by the principal, she relied heavily on citing federal and state program guidelines and policies as a means of explaining and maintaining conditions as they existed. However, when suggestions such as having teachers eat with the students during the first weeks of school were advanced for action, advisory council members felt that they were influencing the school program. This feeling of having access, along with the principal's charismatic purpose of educating Black children and her ability to generate support through hard work and professional competency, appeared to have given the council enough pride in its school to want to assume the role of lobbyist with regional and district school officials.

Goal Elements

The final aspect of the framework used to study the school-community relations activities and procedures at Cassody School was to look at the apparent outcomes of the program in terms of school-community relations goals. These goals were listed and defined as follows: (a) Access is a goal which assures various subpublics that they are able to have their interests represented in the school; (b) Legitimacy is a goal which assures the acceptance, the trust, and the efficacy of the school as an

institution by its various subpublics; (c) Support is a goal which provides for the economic and political resources by various subpublics in the school community sufficient to achieve the primary mission of the school as an institution; (d) Achievement is a goal which provides for optimal student performance in cognitive learning and the basic skills; and (e) Child growth and development is a goal which provides for optimal physical, social, and emotional maturity of pupils.

The extent to which the above goals appeared as outcomes of school-community relations activities and procedures at Cassody School was supported primarily by guidelines for state and federal programs at the school. The political leadership style of the principal and her own personal beliefs about the role of the community in schooling efforts were also supporting factors.

Parents at Cassody School had access to both teachers and the principal if they chose to exercise their options. They could go directly to the school on their own behalf, they could take problems and concerns to the advisory council, or they could make their feelings known to influential individuals such as the chairperson of the advisory council. In addition, the state and federal programs provided local schools with limited budgetary discretion so that money was available to hire people from the community as classroom aides and community liaison personnel. The absorption of these individuals into the school organization, along with the parent volunteers required in the primary grades, had the effect of opening the school to the community and making it possible for more people to view the school as an organization representing their interests.

While it is not advisable to assign cause and effect to the findings in this study, the goals of improved achievement and child growth and development at Cassody School preceded and appeared to facilitate the attainment of legitimacy for the school and support from the community. Data indicated that the assignment of a Black principal to Cassody School relieved the racial cause for community discontent in the 1960s, but actual support for the school was not apparent until the community perceived that good things were happening at the school. The deliberate efforts on the part of the principal to involve parents and other citizens in school programs seemed to create a sense of ownership and pride in the success of the school. Despite the constraint of a transient, changing neighborhood a small core of parents and grandparents continued to overtly support the school. At the same time, the advisory council's approval of instructional programs by signing-off on the budget continued to legitimate the functions of school in spite of internal disharmony and criticism.

Implications of the Study

The school-community relations activities and procedures at Cassody School were different from those observed in other IGE schools. The reasons for this finding appear to be two-fold.

The first influential factor supporting the school-community relations program at Cassody School was that the research site was located in a state which allocated its ESEA Title I and special state funds to

districts on the basis of program plans submitted by individual schools. In addition, parent involvement activities were monitored and evaluated by state officials as stringently as the basic instructional plans.

It is perplexing to ponder the question of why a decentralized program planning and evaluation model is not implemented in more states and large districts. Discussions with principals of inner-city school reveals that too often local schools are still treated to special services by district officials who submit centrally conceived program plans to state departments of education.

Just as instructional programs must be designed to meet the needs of individual students in a variety of settings, school-community relations programs, programs, with parent involvement and participation as one component, must be based on the needs of individual school service areas. It is discouraging to note that a common response of practitioners to Public Law 95-561, Education Amendments of 1978, has been to generate inquiries to the research and development community about the development of training materials to teach parents how to work on advisory committees and/or to train them to work with their children on academic projects at home. It seems to me that both of these approaches address only a narrow set of concerns that should really be addressed as process issues within the context of a decentralized program plan based on the needs of the local school.

The second significant factor supporting plans for an effective school-community relations program at Cassody School was the political leadership style of the principal. By either deliberate planning or intuitive insight, Mrs. Boone used the processes of analysis and conflict resolution to encourage parent access to the school and to generate support from the community.

The combination of a decentralized program planning process and a politically astute principal was a dynamic duo for success at Cassody School. The Silver Lake School District had many inner-city schools receiving ESEA Title I and state funds, but few schools became as well-known for instructional success and parent/community support as Cassody School. Thus, while the Title I and state philosophies encouraged communication between home and school, and involvement and participation of citizens in school affairs were mandated, it appears that the principal's role in effective school-community relations must be given much more attention by program planners and administrator training institutions.

Unfortunately, few administrators receive training in school-community relations skills. To illustrate from personal experience, a principal of an elementary school who organized an advisory council as a result of a state mandate (rather than responding to local needs) called frantically after one meeting to say he thought the parents wanted to take over the school. Upon questioning, it was obvious he had little understanding of how an advisory council could help the school, what

kinds of issues the group might confront, or how to facilitate problem solving among people representing diverse interests and backgrounds. In such a situation, neither unlimited funding nor decentralized program planning could overcome the administrators' apparent lack of understanding of school-community relations principles.

A similar situation exists among teachers who are expected to work cooperatively with parents. Program planners have a tendency to forget that any mandate to include parents in the direct development of their child's instructional program or as volunteers in classrooms requires skills for working with adults that are not necessarily the same as the skills required for teaching children. A beginning teacher in a recent inservice session on parent-teacher communications summarized the situation when she said, "After five years in college, this is the first time I've heard how to actually get parents involved. Everybody talks about it, but no one tells us how to do it!"

One of the over-riding conditions influencing Cassody School and many other urban schools is the matter of staff desegregation. While the issue of racial differences between white teachers and Black children and parents did not emerge as a primary constraint to school-community relations, it was evident that most of the new teachers had difficulty adjusting to their assignments. This study was terminated before the total effect of teacher reassignments and resignations could be observed, but the situation had the potential of eroding the school's legitimacy in the community. While

individual teacher attitudes are likely to be more important than generally accepted stereotypes, teachers who are afraid to be in a community or who have had little experience working with poor people who are racially different from themselves should receive well-planned inservice training to bridge the obvious communication and trust gaps between them and the school's clientele.

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